Reflection

When I first started my research I was skeptical that communicating online would directly relate to higher order thinking and more frequent participation in literature circles. I thought it could support literature circles but wasn’t sure if the time and effort put in, by both the teacher and students, would be worth the outcome. Needless to say, I went in with a very open mind and was hoping to be proved wrong.

I was pleasantly surprised with my outcome even though the data by no means proves my question. Students were energized by online discussion and seemed to enjoy their second book more than their first while increasing their level of participation in literature circles. I believe this was due to increased comprehension from more time talking about their book online. However, this is where one of the flaws of my research appears. Even though both groups read books at their reading level, we all know that books vary greatly and a simple change in genre or how well a story is written can affect student comprehension. I believe that online discussion accounted for a greater percentage of the increased comprehension but I cannot say for sure how much.

When analyzing group A and group B for increased comprehension I was interested in the difference in their participation online. The grade level group participated far less frequently but seemed to show a greater increase in preparing quality questions and improved discussion. Again, I assume these increases would be from greater comprehension but according to their lack of online discussion I’m not sure the online portion contributed much. Students in this group often would not participate in a timely manner, if at all. This is where I assume that simply having to think and moderately talk about the book, in between classroom discussion, was enough to improve comprehension.

Group B was already reading and achieving at a high level before online discussion. I know that communicating online was very engaging to them and they flourished during certain weeks. However, it didn’t seem to affect them as much when it came to preparing quality questions and increasing discussion in class. Their online discussion was at a much higher level compared to group A, but didn’t necessarily produce better discussion in the classroom.

Informal observations of other groups in my class reaffirmed feelings that online discussion benefits struggling or average readers more than high achieving students. Struggling or average readers need extra opportunities to talk about a book to increase comprehension. They need extra time that is often not available in a typical school day. Online discussion provides them this opportunity of learning without the time constraints of a typical school day. High achieving students tend to comprehend at a high level without the help of online discussion. They may become more engaged in literature circles and continue quality discussion throughout the week but online discussion doesn’t seem to drastically improve their already high level of discussion.

After the research was completed, I looked back on the whole process and realized managing the online discussion aspect of literature circles was actually very easy. As the teacher, I put up a generic question each week for groups to respond to, would monitor discussion periodically, and encourage when necessary. Most students enjoyed online discussion but like with any homework, some had a harder time of completing all requirements. All students seemed to benefit from including online discussion in literature circles but at varying degrees. The big idea I came out of this research with was that online discussion is a great differentiation tool. It doesn’t only have to be associated with literature circles and reading but can be used in other subjects where discussion can increase comprehension and learning.

Recommendations

If I were to do this study again I would include more students or groups to help draw a more accurate conclusion. I would also limit the books students could choose from to one genre to help eliminate a possible increase in comprehension strictly due to interest level. The last thing I would change is how the eight weeks fell on the school calendar. I had shortened school weeks and a long break over Christmas and New Years which I felt interrupted the flow of online discussion. In a spin-off study I would be interested to research how online discussion could improve performance in other subjects such as social studies and science.

Future Plan of Action

I do not plan to publish my findings due to the study’s limited sample size. I don’t feel my data is strong enough to come to any final conclusions. My research will be used as a guide for my own teaching practices as it strengthened my beliefs in the use of technology to improve learning. I will probably include online discussion with whole class and other guided reading groups while eventually experimenting with other subjects. At a district level I plan to use my results in a technology meeting to support my efforts in getting a district wide platform for online learning and discussion such as Moodle.org.

The idea that communication with peers increases comprehension remains true and technology gives educators a wonderful tool to meet this fundamental idea. Considering that educators today are expected to teach more content without increasing students’ time in the classroom, I believe that technology will help make up some of this time. With my findings that support the use of online discussion to increase the quality and frequency of participation in literature circles I hope you consider using it in your classroom. Online discussion is a powerful teaching tool and is a great way to meet the needs of our students today and in the future, the 21st century learner.